THE FUR TRADE IN THE SWAN RIVER REGION

MANITOBA

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL
AFFAIRS AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Historic Resources Branch

Honourable Eugene Kostyra
Minister

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The Hudson's Bay and North West companies were locked in a bitter struggle for control of the fur trade in the Canadian interior during the 1790s. Although sometimes violent, this rivalry led to the exploration of vast areas of northwestern Canada and to the establishment of numerous inland trading posts. Competition in the Swan River region was very intense, and it provides an excellent example of how the inland fur trade operations of both companies expanded during this turbulent period.

Traditionally, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was reluctant to venture into the interior, and chose instead to concentrate its posts along Hudson Bay. The North West Company (NWCo) capitalized on the conservative policy of the HBC by pressing far into the unexplored inland reaches of the frontier and by establishing posts throughout the region. With this web of posts the Nor'Westers managed to intercept Indians who were on their way to trade with the HBC. By 1780, the NWCo controlled the bulk of the fur trade's vast riches, and their rivals had to act quickly to counter the offensive.

The HBC had not totally neglected inland operations during the second half of the eighteenth century, however. As early as 1750 the company sent explorers inland to encourage more remote tribes to trade at the posts on Hudson Bay. Although they failed to lure the more distant bands as far as York Factory, these excursions helped to prepare a core of company men for future trade in the interior.

In 1774 Samuel Hearne journeyed to the Saskatchewan River to establish Cumberland House, the first of many new HBC outposts in the interior. Nevertheless, the success of this and other posts was often limited by a lack of sufficient skilled personnel. It was not uncommon for a dozen HBC employees to find themselves competing with ten times as many Nor'Westers. Despite these problems, the HBC was ready for large-scale involvement in the interior by 1790, and one of the areas designated for action was the Swan River region.

Life in the Interior

At the close of the eighteenth century, the area around the Swan River must have seemed an ironically tranquil setting for the conflict which would soon develop there. Peter Fidler, a surveyor for the HBC, had once passed through the region and described the river as a smooth-running stream about nine to fourteen metres wide. According to Fidler, both banks were swampy and muddy near the river's mouth. Although the water abounded with fish in the summer, winter fishing was impossible due to the depth of the ice. Good poplar and pine trees were available for building, and hunters had their choice of moose and red deer in the summer and buffalo in the winter.

The NWCo was the first to establish operations in the area, building on the north bank of the river about nineteen kilometres above Swan Lake in 1787. The founder of "Swan River Fort" was probably

Robert Grant who, with his brother David, managed the NWCo's Assiniboine Department. For some three years Swan River Fort met with little opposition and successfully intercepted Indian bands on their way to trade at the Hudson Bay posts of their rivals.

In 1790, the HBC retaliated by sending Charles Price Isham to build a trading post on "the Swan." The half-breed son of James Isham, a former resident officer at York Factory, Charles was an experienced inland trader. He was one of the first HBC employees to obtain "any degree of Proficiency in Bowing or Steering canoes" and "to perfect himself in the Art of Canoe Building."

Isham and his canoe brigade landed about 0.8 kilometres upstream from the Canadian post and immediately began to construct "Swan River House." The new HBC fort consisted of a large central house flanked by a number of smaller out-buildings, all surrounded by a stockade. Like most inland posts, it was built in the Red River frame style. The walls of the buildings were framed with log uprights set at frequent intervals and joined by horizontally-lain logs. Thatch was used for the roof and sawn logs for the floor, while wooden partitions divided the building into different rooms. The exterior walls were plastered with mud and covered with pine bark. As glass was unavailable, the windows were covered with oiled parchment.

The attic of the central house served as a store room for furs. A

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A sketch of Fort Pembina, c. 1822, similar in design and layout to Isham's post, Swan River House

"victualling shed" and beaver press were located within the walls of the fort, while a garden and potato patch could be found nearby. On a pole in the centre of the complex flew the Union Jack.

When approaching the fort from the river, one could see a set of gates flanked by a guard room. The stockade or pallisade guarded the fort against theft and stood over four metres high. The men's cabins probably lined the two interior side walls of the stockade. Unfortunately, this barrier did not prevent the water of the river from lapping up against the post during a spring flood. According to one account, the river water was so high that some of the traders actually caught fish in their cabins.

Had Isham not been under orders to establish the new post at this location, he probably would have chosen what he believed to be a better spot "about three days farther distant from York." As it was, his activities were hampered by a shortage of goods and well-trained men in an area where his NWCo rivals were already well-established. Even the tobacco that Isham used in trade was inferior to the goods offered by the NWCo traders. Outnumbered by the Nor'Westers, the HBC master bartered his few provisions and then encouraged the Indians to accompany him to York to trade. As far as Isham was concerned this was the only solution to the problem, "otherwise the Canadian traders (NWCo) would have got the whole."

Daily life at the fur trade post was filled with the mundane tasks essential to the men's survival. Maintaining the wooden fort was a constant problem since the traders left it unoccupied during the summer months when they went to York Factory with their furs. Although the master usually hired a native to supply the men with fresh meat, company employees frequently took to the river or the woods to fish and hunt. Guns were kept in good repair and fish nets were made on the site. The traders' diet was often supplemented by the food harvested from a garden and potato patch.

Employees busied themselves making kegs, squaring and sawing timber, packing furs and supplies, stretching and pressing skins and baking bread. Isham also trained his British-born crewmen to make snowshoes, sleds and canoes. The art of canoe-building, although difficult, was essential for the men's survival, as new canoes were needed for the return trip to York Factory. Cedar, buck-rind, bark, pitch and gum were collected, and construction of the boats began in early March for the May departure for York. The men also repaired their old canoes which had lain buried under grass during the winter.

Life at the post could become monotonous and so the occasional visit from another trader, even one from a rival company, was a welcome relief. Despite intense competition, cordial relations in the interior were usually maintained as any news from the outside world was important. In some instances, good relations with rival traders had even greater benefits. William Tomison's HBC Buckingham House on the Saskatchewan River was saved from a fire when Nor'Westers from a nearby post rushed to the scene to help douse the flames. That evening Tomison invited his rivals to the scorched post for an evening of celebration and merriment.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A canoe portage

The employees at Swan River House conducted most of their trade with the "Bungee," "Sooter," "Cree" and "Red Deer" bands. The act of trading with the Indians involved quite an elaborate procedure or ritual. Whenever a large group of Natives came to trade, the young men of the band came first to announce the arrival of the main party. The master of the post usually presented them with gifts of tobacco, paint or alcohol to take back to the main group. Once all of the Natives arrived they would fire their guns off outside the post and the traders inside would respond in kind. The flag in the compound would then be raised and the Native men would proceed into the fort.

Once inside the main house the Indians and traders shared a peace pipe and more gifts of tobacco and liquor were offered to the band. Business transactions did not take place for at least a day while the Indians celebrated outside of the post. Once this elaborate procedure had been observed, trade was conducted. Those Natives who had no furs were given goods on credit, and were then expected to pay off their "debt" throughout the trapping season.

Competition and Expansion

Charles Isham overcame imposing odds on the Swan River to build a steadily improving trade for the HBC. In July 1792 he reached York Factory with 5400 "made beaver" in furs, leaving another 2100 inland

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Hudson's Bay House standard of trade, listed in Peter Fidler's notebook 30 May 1795, gives an indication of the trade goods that would have been available at Isham's posts

for later retrieval. Nevertheless, his success was short-lived. Competition soon led to the rapid multiplication of posts on the river.

In 1793 Isham decided to expand his operations beyond the banks of the Swan River. He journeyed overland to the Assiniboine River to build Marlboro House I in the hope of tapping the prosperous trade in the area. The new site was abandoned after just one season because of the stiff competition.

The NWCo were also busy building new posts during this period. Cuthbert Grant established Bird Mountain House upstream on the Swan River to cut off the flow of furs to the HBC's Swan River House. In 1794, Isham countered this move by constructing Marlboro House II, later known as Somerset House, some three kilometres above Grant's new base. Somerset House was located on the northwest side of a fine open plain frequented by buffalo herds during the winter. Although the new post enjoyed a fairly good trade in its first year, the established Swan River House was reduced to little more than a supply depot.

The same problem eventually affected the trade at Somerset House. The NWCo built posts right beside the two HBC forts on the Swan in

1795. Smaller concerns also established operations; Peter Fidler claimed that the South Company alone had two houses on the river. With so many posts in the same area, Isham held little hope for the future.

In 1794-95 the HBC master managed to secure only 1597 made beaver in trade. Matters were further complicated when the NWCo built yet another post between Somerset House and the Assiniboine River. Not to be outdone, Isham decided to beat his rivals at their own game. In the fall of 1795 he and Peter Fidler built Carlton House on the Assiniboine River. By this time the Assiniboine was already swarming with traders, and Carlton House stood only about 150 metres from the nearest NWCo fort.

The rivalry between the fur trade companies was not Isham's only concern. A trader's advancement in the HBC was closely tied to his success in the interior and, as a result, HBC employees sometimes found themselves competing with one another. Isham was no exception to the rule. While at Carlton House he vied for trade not only with the Montreal-based NWCo, but also with an HBC post occupied by men from Albany House.

By 1795 many of the Indians from the Swan River region had migrated to more plentiful trapping areas. Neither Somerset House nor Swan River House procured much trade, and even provisions were in dangerously short supply. Both posts now served primarily as depots for the trade being done at Carlton House.

An overland route between the forts on the Swan River and the Assiniboine post gave Isham a jump on the competition. Each year he was able to reach the site a month before his rivals arrived. Yet despite the fact that Isham's returns for 1795-96 climbed to 2110 made beaver, he was still doubtful of future success. The frustrated master wrote: "the Natives . . . had scarcely anything . . . to trade and having such a number of neighbours around me it was the greatest good luck I procured what I did."

The increasing insubordination of Isham's men in the later years did not help matters. Labour unrest in the Swan River area and at other HBC posts was connected to the introduction of the York Boat. These new boats could carry more freight, thereby reducing the total number of men needed for inland transport. As a result, men experienced in canoe-building and handling lost some of their status and were even threatened with unemployment. Disputes over work and wages continued to produce frustration, and employees frequently vented their anger on their superiors in the interior.

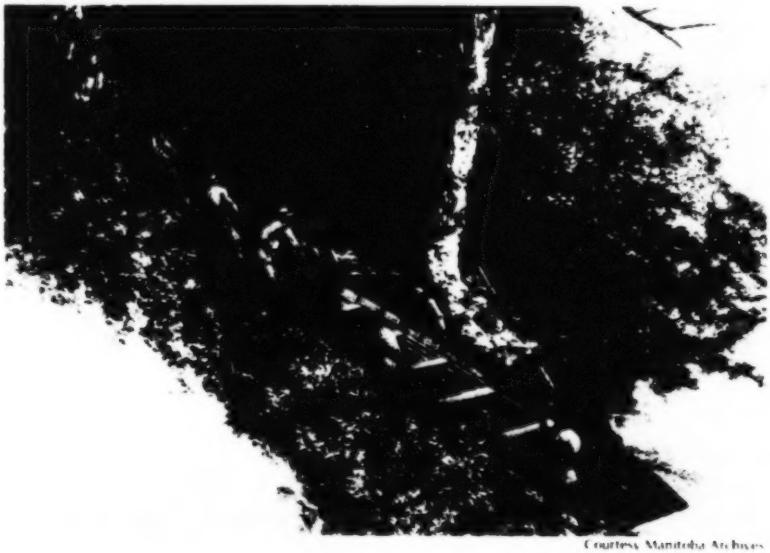
Isham tried his best to maintain discipline, but disorder increased to the great detriment of trade. At Carlton House his men refused to retrieve recently killed game on Sunday even though it was the custom "to fetch the meat" as soon as possible. At Swan River House all hands declined to repair canoes because the master refused to serve them fat with their fish dinner. With the men doing pretty much as they pleased, trade declined. Isham probably decided that he had had enough when one of his men gave him "a hearty trimming." In an attempt to maintain order, Robert Longmoor was dispatched from York Factory. After 1796,

Isham did not return to the region.

Robert Longmoor enjoyed little success as master of the Swan River region. He continually complained about the multitude of posts in an area that had already been exhausted of its furs. The threat of starvation also became very real, as traders competed not only for furs but also for the necessities of survival. Methods of trade became more ruthless as competition increased. It was even alleged that the Nor'Westers resorted to murder to prevent the Indians from trading at rival posts.

HBC trade declined from 2110 made beaver in 1796 to only 795 in 1799. Although it climbed to 1047 made beaver in 1800, Longmoor doubted that any future profit was possible. On 9 May 1800, all hands of Swan River, Somerset and Carlton houses left for York Factory, while some of their rivals struggled on in the area until the HBC and NWCo were amalgamated in 1821.

Competition and expansion in the Swan River area illustrates the intense rivalry which had developed in the Canadian fur trade. This rivalry motivated the establishment of posts in previously unsettled regions and stimulated the exploration of the Canadian interior. After the merger in 1821, the Swan River region became the centre of an HBC district where company forts preceded the rush of homesteaders in the late nineteenth century. Although almost nothing remains of the early posts of Isham and his rivals, they are a lasting tribute to the role of the fur trade in the opening of the Canadian west.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Portaging a York Boat c 1880

Suggestions for Further Reading

For a general overview of the fur trade in the Canadian west the reader may want to consult, E.E. Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), or *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

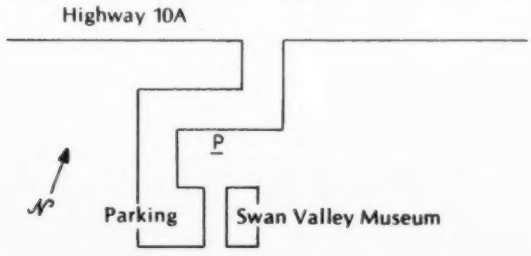
A variety of documents pertaining to the fur trade in the Swan River area can be found in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg.

Credits

The cover photograph is a map of the Swan River area sketched by Peter Fidler and printed courtesy of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

THE SWAN RIVER VALLEY
This area was the scene of intense competition between the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies from 1787, when the first fur trading post was built on Swan River, until 1821 when the rivals merged. Posts were built near here under direction of Cuthbert Grant, senior, for the Nor'Westers in 1787 and 1793, and Charles Isham for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1790 and 1794. The valley was then an important branch of the route of both companies trading with the Plains Indians. David Thompson visited the area in 1797, and Daniel Harmon arrived in 1800 for a stay of five years.
THE HISTORIC SITES ADVISORY BOARD OF MANITOBA

This plaque is located just off of Highway 10A, close to the Swan Valley Museum.



OUR HERITAGE

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.

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